

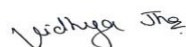
National College of Ireland Project Submission Sheet

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Inclusion of neurodivergent employees in small-to-medium sized enterprises in Ireland: A qualitative research study from the perspective of HR Managers

By Vidhya Jha

MA in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August 2025



1. Abstract

Background and Aims: Neurodiversity is an important part of organisational diversity, but it is often overlooked in wider DE&I (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) efforts because many neurodiverse conditions are not visible and sometimes it is misunderstood with disability. Neurodiversity in the workplace offers valuable insights into workplace practices, providing useful guidance for both employers and neurodivergent individuals (RICKE, 2025). Literature reveal several barriers and approaches that employers may take for inclusion of neurodivergent employees (Hutson & Hutson, 2023) (Ali, et al., 2024) (Antony, et al., 2024) (Hays-Thomas, 2022), however, there remains a need for more in-depth research focused specifically within Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Ireland. Moreover, previous studies are focused broadly on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or even neurodiversity from the perspective of neurodivergent individuals (Albright, et al., 2020) (Hargreaves, et al., 2022). This study specifically examines the perspective of Human Resource (HR) managers within SMEs in Ireland on the topic of inclusion of neurodivergent employees within SMEs.

Method: A qualitative thematic method was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with semi-structured interviews of six Human Resources (HR) managers holding experience in recruitment, training and employee management within SMEs in Ireland. The participants were identified through convenience and snowball sampling. A thematic analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word.

Result: Four key themes emerged from the data: (i) Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees, (ii) Organisational and systematic barriers, (iii) Organisational culture and leadership support, and (iv) Human Resources and organisation interventions.

Conclusion: Result indicates that while HR managers recognise several benefits towards inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within workplace, there are some barriers that limits SMEs to include neurodivergent individuals within the workplace. However, it is also observed that these barriers can be addressed through education, awareness, fostering inclusive work culture and organisations strategic intervention.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland

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(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

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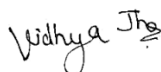
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2. Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to the completion of this dissertation. Firstly, I am deeply grateful to my research supervisor, Dr. David Mothersill, for his guidance and valuable feedback throughout the entire process.

My sincere thanks also go to the research participants, whose openness in sharing their professional and personal insights added great depth to this study. Finally, I am especially thankful to my parents, my family, friends and co-workers for their unwavering encouragement and support throughout my academic journey.

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3. Abbreviations

ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
ND	Neurodivergent
SME	Small and medium size enterprise
MNE	Multi-national enterprise
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactive disorder
L&D	Learning & Development
DE&I	Diversity Equality and Inclusion
TA	Thematic Analysis
HR	Human Resources

4. Introduction

This research examined the perspectives of Human Resource (HR) managers towards inclusion of neurodivergent employees in the workplace among Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) in Ireland. This section will outline insights into the research background, understanding of the term ‘Neurodiversity’ and imparts rationale as to why the present study is important.

4.1. Background of the study

In today’s fast-paced and competitive business landscape, while visible aspects of diversity have received significant focus (CIPD, 2024); neurodiversity is found to be underrepresented and often misunderstood with disability (Khan, et al., 2023). This dimension of diversity is however notably absent from Ireland’s official labour and employment statistics (Department of Enterprise, 30 December 2024). (Barrett & Burgess, 2008) argues that the “small is beautiful” mindset can sometimes allow small businesses to bypass worker protection regulations, unintentionally reinforcing inequality. Existing research highlights the need for structured and formal support systems to effectively include neurodivergent individuals in the workforce (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2019) (Ali, et al., 2024). This study aims to explore the perspective of HR manager within SMEs towards inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in SME organisation in Ireland.

4.2. Neurodiversity Definition

The term ‘Neurodiversity’ refers to the natural variation in how human brain functions, learn, and process information (Armstrong, 2015) (Austin & Pisano, 2017). It means that people naturally think, learn, and process information in different ways. This includes conditions like autism, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, Tourette’s syndrome, and other learning or thinking differences (Wen, et al., 2024) (Lai, et al., 2025). Therefore, neurodiversity is an umbrella term that is used for such neurological conditions (Kamble, et al., 2024), the term was coined to offer a diverse perspective of neurocognitive conditions as differences in how individuals

think, functions and learn rather than being viewed as a medical deficiency. Individuals with neurologically different abilities are hence referred as ‘neurodivergent’ whereas individuals without such neurological variations are commonly referred to as “neurotypical” individuals (Khan, et al., 2023). Neurodiversity is gaining signification attention since recent past (LeFevre-Levy, et al., 2023), however, it still needs a greater attention.

4.3. Neurodiversity in modern society

The global prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has risen significantly, increasing by 61% from 0.62% in 2012 to 1.00% in 2021 among children. A similar upward trend is seen in individuals with ADHD. Among adults, the prevalence more than doubled, rising by 123% from 0.43% in 2007 to 0.96% in 2016. These figures reflect growing recognition, improved diagnostic tools, and increased awareness of neurodevelopmental conditions worldwide (Lai, et al., 2025).

Literature reveal that higher prevalence rates are observed in high-income countries, particularly the United States (U.S), Canada, and parts of Europe, where rates range from 1.5% to over 2% in comparison to many low- and middle-income countries often due to underdiagnosis, limited data, and lack of diagnostic infrastructure (Issac, et al., 2025). Such increasing trend is directly proportional to an increase in neurodivergent adults in the society those are found to face constant barriers in finding successful employment opportunities despite holding unique strengths (Hutson & Hutson, 2023).

It is also found that about 15–20% of the global population is found to be neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020). In many developed countries, neurodivergent individuals face an unemployment rate that is three times higher than those with physical or visible disabilities, and six times higher than individuals without any disabilities (Khan, et al., 2023). This extraordinarily high levels (upwards of 80-90%) of underemployment and unemployment warrants attention and can be partly attributed to little knowledge of how to create and manage an inclusive neurodivergent workplace for positive work outcomes (Karwowska & Majewski, 2025). This study can help us better understand what factors influences the decision of employers to employ neurodivergent individuals.

4.4. Neurodiversity in Ireland

In Ireland's competitive labour market where many employers are facing ongoing skill shortage, untapped neurodivergent talent presents both a social imperative and a business opportunity (CSO, 2025). Rising identification rates among children with neurodivergent conditions forecast a larger, neurodivergent future workforce (The Irish Times, 2025). This trend offers the opportunity to enrich Ireland's labour market with a talent pool that may help employers to gain competitive advantage. According to an Irish advocacy charity group, 68% of employees are unfamiliar with their neurodivergent condition (Ability Focus, 2024). Another important aspect is the stigma and low confidence in the workplace. A nationally representative Red C poll found that 45% of neurodivergent Irish workers feel their workplace is not inclusive (Red C Poll and BOI, 2024) and only 19% of respondents believed their company's policies support neurodivergent employees. Another report by Ireland's autism advocacy charity 'AsIAm' highlights the exclusion of neurodivergent people from the workforce represents as a major loss of talent to both employers and society. The report show that 85% of Autistic people in Ireland are either unemployed or underemployed (AsIAm, 2025).

According to the latest data from the (Central Statistics Office, 2024), SMEs employs 69% of the workforce in Ireland. Notably, nearly half of all employees work in businesses with fewer than 50 workers, comprising 22% in small enterprises and 28% in micro enterprises. This highlights the crucial role SMEs can play in advancing neurodiversity and the need to address the misconceptions and barriers that may hinder inclusive practices (Central Statistics Office, 2024). Research also reveal that while much of the inclusion initiatives are led by multinationals (RICKE, 2025) (Wen, et al., 2024) (Loison, 2024) (AsIAm, 2025) and large public sector organisations (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2025), SMEs which form the backbone of the Irish economy, accounting for over 99% of businesses and roughly 68% of employment have been less visibly engaged in this arena.

4.5. Research Problem

Despite increasing awareness of neurodiversity, neurodivergent individuals remain significantly underrepresented in the workforce, particularly within Ireland's SMEs. While larger companies are beginning to implement inclusion efforts towards neurodiversity, SMEs often face certain barriers which limits them to advance the inclusion. Existing research are mostly cantered around neurodivergent individual's experiences (Ali, et al., 2024) (Davies, et al., 2025), creating a gap in understanding from the employer's perspective and the current study aims to fill that gap.

5. Literature Review

The current study examined the perspectives of HR managers towards inclusion of neurodivergent employees in Irish small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This section discusses and critically evaluates key literature on neurodiversity and inclusion in the workplace highlighting the current gaps in the literature.

5.1. Evolution of Neurodiversity

Judy Singer, a sociologist in the late 1990s coined the term "Neurodiversity" (Blackburn, 2023) and advocated for the recognition of neurological differences to be seen as a form of diversity instead of being viewed as deficit or disorder that needs to be cured (Loison, 2024). Neurodiversity (ND) encompasses a variety of neurodevelopmental conditions including, but not limited to, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and other unspecified conditions (Armstrong, 2015) (CIPD, 2024) (LeFevre-Levy, et al., 2023). The idea of neurodiversity within the workplace is nascent but now a rapidly evolving worldwide gaining increased recognition (LeFevre-Levy, et al., 2023) (Kamble, et al., 2024) (Hutson & Hutson, 2023) (Lai, et al., 2025).

5.2. Neurodiversity: A journey from "Disability" to "Potential"

The journey from being viewed as medically deficient to cognitively different began with the reframing of the term "ND" itself and it spread an awareness of neurocognitive

conditions (Khan, et al., 2023). The neurodiversity perspective advocates that these different ways of thinking and processing information are natural variations in the brain instead of being tagged as "right" or "wrong". This approach promotes focusing on people's strengths and seeing neurodiversity as a form of human diversity rather than as a set of disorders. It is also argued that people in authority (including employers, policy makers, educators or dominant cultural groups) influence the inclusion or exclusion of people based on neurodevelopmental differences (RICKE, 2025). Existing research reveals that neurodivergent individuals bring some unique qualities and if their potential is harnessed effectively, employer can gain competitive advantage (Lai, et al., 2025) (Morfaki & Morfaki, 2022). Some autistic individuals are found to often do well in jobs that need strong focus, attention to detail, and pattern recognition and that's why some tech and finance companies actively recruit autistic talent for roles like software testing, cybersecurity, and data analysis (Armstrong, 2015) (Wen, et al., 2024) (Specialisterne, 2022). People with dyslexia often excel at seeing the big picture and solving complex problems (Venter & Rossouw, 2025). Their strong visual and spatial skills can make them stand out in areas such as engineering and design. Individuals with ADHD may find routine tasks challenging, but they often show high levels of creativity and have a strong drive for entrepreneurship (Lai, et al., 2025).

(Albright, et al., 2020) argues that a strengths-based approach is becoming more common in research and in practice. (Hutson & Hutson, 2023) suggests that we should value neurodiversity like we do biodiversity seeing each person's way of thinking as having unique strengths. Instead of trying to 'fix' neurodivergent people, this view focuses on creating workplaces that use their strengths and offer the right support (Khan, et al., 2023). Recent studies reveal a mindset shift at workplace where organisations have started sharing success stories about neurodivergent employees who, with the right support, have made valuable contributions like new ideas or better work quality with the appropriate support (Kamble, et al., 2024) (Hutson & Hutson, 2023).

This shows a shift from older views that focused mainly on problems, toward more positive and balanced approach that is strength based (Ibeh, et al., 2024). As employers have started to recognise the strengths of neurodivergent individuals, companies are relooking at their hiring policies and practices, For example; Ernst & Young (EY) and

JP Morgan have revamped their hiring processes by replacing traditional interviews which can unintentionally exclude neurodivergent candidates with skill-based assessments that give these applicants a better chance to show their abilities (Lai, et al., 2025).

5.3. Social Stigma and Disclosure

A study by Mothersill and colleagues (2023) reveal that knowledge about autism is lower than other groups among the Irish public (Mothersill, et al., 2023). It is found that social stigma remains a major barrier for neurodivergent individuals seeking or maintaining employment as many fear of being misunderstood, judged, or discriminated against if they disclose their condition. This fear is often rooted in negative stereotypes and ableist attitudes that label neurodivergence as a deficit rather than a natural variation (Hargreaves, et al., 2022). The decision to disclose is especially challenging due to the lack of psychological safety seen in many workplaces. We and colleagues (2025) argue that neurodivergent individuals frequently report anxiety about being seen as less capable, and in some cases, have experienced exclusion or even job loss after disclosing their condition (Wen, et al., 2024). Research further highlights this misconception within the employment context where stigma often leads to discrimination, social exclusion, and negative perceptions, which reduce opportunities for jobs, promotions, and workplace support (Wen, et al., 2024). To overcome this stigma which is often rooted in misunderstandings and fear about mental illness, it is recommended to increase public awareness, promoting open dialogue, and implementing anti-stigma interventions in workplaces and healthcare systems that ensure people with mental health conditions are treated with respect and equity (Mothersill, et al., 2024). Karwowska and Majewski (2025) argues about the critical role of leadership that can foster inclusion of neurodivergent employees within workplace. According to this study, leaders who adapt inclusive leadership can actively dismantle stigma, enabling neurodivergent employees to thrive. This approach reframes neurodiversity not as a challenge to manage but as a strength to be supported, moving workplaces toward genuine inclusion and equity (Karwowska & Majewski, 2025).

5.4. Workplace Dynamics and Neurodiversity

Blackburn (2023) highlights that many neurodivergent individuals experience bias during recruitment, contributing to high unemployment rates. However, it is also argued that a competitive labour market and growing skills shortages may encourage greater inclusion of neurodivergent workers workforce (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). Advancing inclusion of neurodivergent individuals require collaboration between employers, neurodivergent employees, and policymakers. According to (McDowall, et al., 2024), employers should value neurodivergent talent and ensure inclusive practices. While some neurodivergent employees may need targeted support to thrive, inclusive policies and legislations along with awareness can help mitigate the barriers. (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024) also reveals that government and policy makers have a critical role toward moving neurodivergent workers in the job market. Implementing inclusion initiatives entails cost which organisations may have to offer. This factor is seen as a key barrier for the SMEs as they often struggle to replicate such initiatives (McDowall, et al., 2024). Further, previous study agrees the need for a universal design (UD) approach that is focused on structuring workplaces to be accessible to all, regardless of neurodiverse condition status (Silver, et al., 2023). A report by CIPD (Thompson, 2024) reveals that offering support to neurodivergent individuals at workplace is still an area needing improvement as only 39% of employees reported that their organisation provides clear access to reasonable adjustments.

With regard to awareness of neurodiversity, Waisman-Nitzan and colleagues (2019) highlights a significant gap between employers' awareness of cognitive disabilities and their understanding of the broader implications these conditions may have in the workplace (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019). While visible traits such as challenges in social interaction and communications are often seen explicitly, less apparent characteristics like restricted interests, repetitive behaviours, and sensory sensitivities frequently go unnoticed or unaddressed. Research reveals that only about 17% of the U.S. workforce identifies as neurodivergent, a figure that likely underrepresents the actual population (LeFevre-Levy, et al., 2023). Similarly, in Poland, employment among autistic individuals remains as low as 2%, compared to around 10% in other EU nations (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). This underrepresentation is often linked to misperceptions and insufficient understanding of neurodivergence, which can

lead to bias, exclusion, and missed opportunities to leverage unique skill sets (Blackburn, 2023). Wen and colleagues (2024) argue that when employers lack clear inclusion policies and manager training, neurodivergent employees may feel unsafe and choose to hide their differences. This can lead to stress, burnout, and poor job performance (Wen, et al., 2024).

5.5. A comparison of neurodiversity inclusion in large organisations vs SMEs

The organisation culture plays a significant role in shaping diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) efforts (Ibeh, et al., 2024). Research has shown that the size of an organisation can influence its attitudes toward hiring neurodivergent individuals. Larger organisations tend to be more open to hiring disabled or neurodivergent employee. This openness is often linked to their greater resources, previous experience with disabled staff, and access to external support systems. As a result, employers from larger companies are generally more likely to have positive views toward hiring autistic adults while small and medium organisations face barriers due to its comparatively smaller size, limited resources (Wen, et al., 2024). This lack of knowledge can accidentally exclude neurodivergent people; for example, an SME might not adjust interviews for neurodivergent candidates because they do not realise traditional interviews may not show their true skills (Whelpley & Woznyj, 2023). Additionally, large organisations often have dedicated Human Resource (HR) professionals, diversity officers, and budgets for training or workplace adjustments while SMEs typically operate with leaner structures or small HR teams to manage all people issues often without formal D&I policies (Wen, et al., 2024).

Prior research indicates that SMEs frequently handle employee differences on a case-by-case, informal basis, rather than through written strategies or programs (Karwowska & Majewski, 2025). It is further argued that while SMEs informal practices allow the decision makers to make changes or adjustments faster without bureaucratic delays or red tape common perceived in larger companies (Van Berkel, 2025). The challenges within SMEs further explained by the European Commission citing their focus on urgent day-to-day operations and the worry that diversity efforts are too difficult or time-consuming (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2015). Further, the capacity to provide accommodations differs in large organisations versus SMEs. Large firms are perceived

to offer greater adjustments or assistive technologies more easily or may have existing infrastructure (Kamble, et al., 2024), whereas SMEs are especially micro-enterprises and may find minor costs difficult to address. Although SMEs often face challenges like limited resources and lack of formal structures, they have unique strengths that support inclusion of neurodivergent individuals. Their flexibility and close-knit workplace culture can be used to build more inclusive environments where neurodivergent employees feel supported and valued (Barrett & Burgess, 2008). It is argued that while SMEs can significantly contribute towards improving social inclusion of neurodivergent workforce, the lack of awareness, effective policies, existing job inequality, pay parity and social stigma can limit inclusion of neurodivergent employees within SMEs (Barrett & Burgess, 2008). (Khan, et al., 2023) argues that company size affects the inclusion practices to be realistic or effective. Another study reveals that most neurodiversity programs are in large firms (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024), and therefore, further studies are needed on SMEs that could fill this gap.

5.6. Leadership - A critical success factor towards inclusion of neurodiversity

Leadership plays a vital role in driving the change and inclusion practices. Previous research argues that traditional leadership models are often inadequate for neurodivergent individuals and reveals the benefit of inclusive leadership (Szulc, 2024). Szulc (2024) indicates that empathy and understanding are essential in an empathetic leader which is viewed as the critical factor for a positive organisation climate. Leaders who demonstrate a genuine understanding of the challenges associated with different neurodevelopmental conditions are better equipped to provide effective accommodations and foster efficiency (Karwowska & Majewski, 2025). Additionally, balancing between accommodation and stigmatization is the key.

Moreover, creating an inclusive environment for neurodivergent individuals is a reciprocal process. Vargas-Salas and colleagues (2025) argue that leaders themselves require significant support to be effective, this includes access to comprehensive, high-quality training that goes beyond a simple "tick-box exercise" (Vargas-Salas, et al., 2025). However, it is also recognised that the initiative to drive inclusion requires emotional labour and significant time commitment, hence leaders themselves, need

access to support systems to prevent burnout and manage their responsibilities effectively.

5.7. Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage?

Blackburn (2023) advocates a shift in mindset, moving away from focusing on the difficulties neurodivergent individuals face and instead recognising the strengths they bring to the workplace (Blackburn, 2023). Despite the unique qualities and strengths, challenges still exist in attracting, hiring, and retaining neurodivergent employees (Healy, 2022). (Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024) argues that while embracing neurodiversity can enhance an organisation's public image, the inclusion practices are still perceived to be low. Employers may gain competitive advantages if they adopt the strength-based approach, however, it often requires ongoing support and formal strategy to be truly effective (Austin & Pisano, 2017). The initiatives like vocational training are found to be helpful for neurodivergent individuals to recognise their strengths and be able to communicate their strengths during recruitment (Albright, et al., 2020). In a rapidly evolving AI-driven world, leveraging neurodivergent talent enables organisations to gain a competitive edge, solve complex problems, stay agile, and maintain a human advantage alongside technological advancements. Researchers have argued that while AI adoption accelerates, automating linear and repetitive tasks, it cannot replace or replicate human cognitive diversity (Potter & Ramji, 2025). Neurodivergent individuals such as those with dyslexia (Venter & Rossouw, 2025) or ADHD often offer unique strengths like lateral thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, which are vital for navigating ambiguity and driving innovation. While AI-driven recruitment and psychometric tools are found to be effective; it can inadvertently perpetuate bias if not properly designed or interpreted. Shifting to strengths-based assessments, along with accommodations and alternative evaluations, can boost hiring success, promote inclusivity, and combine AI's strengths with the unique value of human cognitive diversity (Potter & Ramji, 2025).

5.8. Critical analysis of key literature reviewed & research Gap

Some of the key literatures on the topic 'Inclusion of neurodivergent employees within workplace' reveal that while neurodiversity inclusion has attracted growing global

attention, much of these studies has various limitations. The research by (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) explored limitations and barriers from employers' perspective within the Israeli context where qualitative research method with an exploratory in-depth interview was used. A sample of 11 participants mainly in the role of first line managers across various industries experienced at employing workers with autism participated in the study. The data was analysed with thematic analysis which offered valuable insights towards employers' perception of autism. Alongside, the study also highlighted the sensitiveness shown by employers towards needs to people with autism and willingness to find solutions. A similar study (Szulc, 2024) focused mainly on U.K and Poland used two phased qualitative method to explores the working relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders. The first phase involved 12 semi-structured interviews with neurodivergent employees holding mainly general managers role and managerial roles within UK (United Kingdom) while the second phase involved unstructured focus group with 15 students / academic professionals pursuing the postgraduate diploma program in 'Neurodiversity at work' in Poland. The participants were recruited using snowballing sampling in the first phase while it used convenience sampling for second phase. The study revealed the importance of empathy and awareness as the driving force towards neuro-inclusive leadership. This study consisted of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those from the UK and Poland. Although cultural diversity can be an advantage, differences between cultures may have influenced the study's results. While both the studies revealed perspective of employees and employers both towards inclusion, these were focused within Israeli context (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) and UK context (Szulc, 2024). These studies offer a rich insight; however, the findings cannot be generalised within Irish context.

Ireland's Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015 (ISB, 1998) and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015–2024 (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2019) outlines a strong legal and policy landscape. However, compared to countries with mature neurodiversity initiatives such as the UK or Australia (Austin & Pisano, 2017) (Doyle & McDowall, 2022); Ireland remains in the early stages of developing structured, nationwide approaches. Research by Venter and Rossouw (2025) is focused within the South African context examining perspective of employees with dyslexia towards organisational support offered to them. The study

used a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews. Data from a sample of 15 participants was analysed with thematic analysis and it revealed ‘social stigma’ and ‘fear of being judged’ as the key barrier towards inclusion of dyslexic individuals (Venter & Rossouw, 2025). The SME dominance makes neurodiversity a unique aspect within Irish context, limiting the direct applicability of studies conducted on other countries. Hence, while the study offers a rich insight, the findings cannot be directly generalizable to Ireland.

SMEs, which account for over 99% of all enterprises and employ most of the Irish workforce (CSO, 2023), are a critical arena for advancing neurodiversity inclusion. Research by Van Berkel (2025) conducted amongst SMEs in the Netherlands showed the impact of organisation size on hiring and recruitment of neurodivergent individuals. The study used a quantitative research method and a total of 309 SME employers participated in the survey. The data was analysed using SPSS and the finding revealed that in SMEs, the strongest positive predictors for hiring people with disabilities were organisational size and capabilities. While the study used a quantitative method, the findings reveal that formal HR recruitment and selection practices were negatively linked to employment and that Human Resources plays a critical role in driving inclusion within workplace (Van Berkel, 2025). Another key research by Albright and colleagues (2020) was carried on understanding employers’ perspective of hiring individuals with autism within SMEs in the U.S. The study included sample of 13 employers within U.S (majority in the small to medium sized organisations) and data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. The data gathered through semi-structured interview offered a rich insight and revealed that while employers recognised both unique strengths and potential challenges in hiring individuals with autism, the need for appropriate accommodations, adopting a strength-based approach is still missing (Albright, et al., 2020). While these studies offered valuable insights with regards to barriers and benefits with SMEs, it was done within the U.S context and Netherland context (Van Berkel, 2025), thus the findings may not be generalised in Ireland.

Another research (McDowall, et al., 2024) also reveals employer’s perspective and the findings shows lack of support to drive neurodiversity is the key barrier towards neuro-inclusion workplace. This study was done within U.K and used a quantitative method

to analyse participants feedback via survey. A total of 985 employees (those identified as neurodivergent) and 127 employers, both sample groups were from varied organisation sizes across various sectors participated in the survey and data was reported with descriptive statistics. This study included a small sample of employers and so the findings may have got influenced with the employee's perspectives.

Potter and Ramji (2025) revealed that HR Managers operate at the nexus of organisational strategy, legal compliance, and workplace culture. They act as the face of an organisation and are the primary point of contact for workers seeking support and planning training and development initiatives for line managers (Potter & Ramji, 2025). Their perspective is therefore essential for understanding how systemic barriers can be dismantled. Moreover, HR Managers have a unique view of both employee needs and employer limitations such as training budgets, awareness levels among line managers, and workload pressures (Ibeh, et al., 2024). Their perspective is vital for designing realistic, implementable interventions. Kersten and colleagues (2025) examined the role of HR (Human resources) towards driving a strengths-based neurodiversity approach. A qualitative method with a sample of 30 participants were interviewed (15 HR Professionals, 4-supervisors of neurodivergent employees and 11 neurodivergent employees). Participants were from various sizes of organisation within Netherland and particularly within STEM sectors. While the study revealed the need to embed neurodiversity initiatives at a strategic level rather than at operational level for greater impact, the findings cannot be generalised to HR practices within the Irish context since the findings here might be influenced with perspective of neurodivergent individuals those were part of this study or even their supervisors (Kersten, et al., 2025).

Research within the Irish context (O'Neill & Kenny, 2023) was done using a qualitative thematic analysis. This study explored the experiences of workers in Ireland about neurodiversity. The study included semi-structured interview with four autistic teachers. While the study offered a rich insight, the key limitation of this study was its small sample size, alongside the fact that this group is "under-researched" and "largely invisible" within existing Irish research and policy literature. After reviewing some of the above-mentioned key literature, it can be argued that the current empirical study on 'Inclusion of neurodivergent employees within SMEs in Ireland' will offer a valuable insight within the Irish context.

5.9. Conclusion

Unlike the large organisations, SMEs work with limited resources and usually have one or fewer HR personnel to manage all facets of HR. Hence, while the perspectives of neurodivergent employees, line managers and senior leaders are invaluable, interviewing HR managers provides a unique and crucial vantage point that bridges the gap between lived experience and strategic intent. Therefore, it is important to conduct this research to explore the perspective of HR Managers within SMEs in Ireland towards ‘Inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within workplace’ which is the aim of this study.

The author has found lack of empirical study within the Irish context on this topic and so, the current study will make a significant and original contribution by generating data that is directly relevant to Irish policymakers and business leaders.

6. Research Questions and Objective

The literature review outlines both the advantages and challenges of including neurodivergent individuals in small and medium-sized enterprises. However, there is still a lack of empirical study on how Irish SMEs perceive neurodiversity. This key question forms the basis of the current study.

6.1. Research Objective

This research aims to explore the perspective of HR managers within SME in Ireland towards the limitations, barriers, and strength associated with fostering neurodiversity within the SME organisation. Although existing research on inclusion of persons with autism in the workplace presents the barriers and opportunities from the perspective of neurodivergent individuals and organisation (Albright, et al., 2020) (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) (Barrett & Burgess, 2008) (Wen, et al., 2024) (Ali, et al., 2024) (Karwowska & Majewski, 2025), this topic requires further investigation within small and medium-sized enterprises. Increased awareness and continued research will help promote greater inclusion of neurodivergent employees among SME employers.

The aim of this study is to explore the various factors that limits the SME employers towards hiring neurodivergent employees and find out what support / resources they might need to include ND within their workforce. The aim of this study is to identify strategies that would open companies for continuous employment of ND adults.

6.2. Research Questions (s)

This study aims to answer the primary questions ‘How do HR managers perceive the inclusion of neurodivergent workers in the Irish SMEs?

In addition to this, the research also concentrates to answer the inter-related question:

- R.Q 1.1 - What do SME employers perceive to be the key barriers to greater inclusivity of neurodivergent employees in their Organisation?
- R.Q.1.2 - What do SME employers perceive to be the key benefits for the organisation of greater inclusivity of neurodivergent employees?
- R.Q.1.3 - What do SME employers perceive to be the key supports that would lead to greater inclusivity of neurodivergent employees in their organisation?
- R.Q.1.4 - What experience do SME employers have of recruitment and onboarding of neurodivergent employees in their organisation?

These questions open a discussion on how the SME employers perceive about neurodiversity inclusion in their workplaces, and what are their key apprehensions towards neurodiversity inclusion, do they view this as competitive advantage ?

The goal is to find out what is most important when creating new policies and practices that support a neurodivergent culture from the perspective of HR managers. This includes how SMEs hire and support neurodivergent individuals throughout their work life cycle journey. It also aims to explore how other stakeholders in the management such as leaders, managers, human resource professionals can help with tackling the barriers and guide their teams effectively towards fostering a diverse culture. To do this, what kind of support they need, what are the key skills and what are their expectations. The study also encourages the HR managers to suggest their own views for making inclusion a part of business change. Key focus areas include recruitment, awareness, communication, and physical workplace adjustments to support long-term success.

Further, the study has been narrowed to Irish SMEs, as the SMEs contribute to 90% employment in Ireland (CSO, 2025). Due to the tight labour market and skill shortage, neurodiversity can be a big opportunity for SME employers in Ireland to gain competitive advantage.

7. Research Methods

The key studies reviewed in this area primarily employed qualitative methods, utilising semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool (Albright, et al., 2020) (Kersten, et al., 2025) (Szulc, 2024). These methods enabled the collection of factual and scientific data. In alignment with this, the present research adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals directly involved in the hiring process and managing the employee life cycle within SME organisations in Ireland. Furthermore, six key studies discussed in the literature review used thematic analysis to analyse their data and extract key themes and findings. This study follows a similar approach, employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework following its six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report to guide data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Selecting a suitable research method is essential for effectively addressing the research question. The research onion framework (Saunders, 2015) provides a structured way to determine the most appropriate research philosophy, approach, strategy, and techniques. To explore employer perspectives on inclusion of neurodivergent employees in Irish SMEs, a qualitative exploratory approach was chosen, making semi-structured interviews the most fitting method (Antony, et al., 2024). These interviews, guided by a pre-prepared set of questions, were tested through a pilot study to ensure their relevance and clarity. A quantitative approach is not suitable in this case, as it may lack the depth needed to thoroughly analyse participant responses, and this might be an aim for future research (Albright, et al., 2020).

A similar approach was adopted in previous studies, which produced valuable insights (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) (Albright, et al., 2020) (Szulc, 2024). Building on this,

the current research also employs a qualitative method, using semi-structured interviews with HR managers who is viewed as a crucial part of organisation's management responsible for driving organisational strategies and people practices. This method aims to uncover deeper understanding, existing practices, challenges, and opportunities related to inclusion of neurodivergent employees in SME settings.

7.1. Research Design

The researcher implemented a qualitative (thematic analysis) with an inductive approach. This study includes an interpretative phenomenological analysis with an inductive approach and semi-structured interview as research tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on the research questions which are exploratory in nature, (i.e., we were trying to understand something new or something which is not well studied), this type of research method was well-suited for exploring complex topics in depth, especially when the focus is to understand people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher selected a mono method, that suited the research objectives.

To collect qualitative data, six semi-structured individual interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams with cross-sectional time horizon. This method was chosen for its convenience and accessibility, allowing participants to join from various locations while maintaining a personal, face-to-face interaction. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions (see Appendix A), which encouraged participants to respond in their own words and share their thoughts freely. This format also gave the researcher flexibility to use prompts and ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses, allowing for a more natural and in-depth exploration of key topics as they arose during the conversation. Since inclusion of neurodivergent employees in SMEs is a topic that has not been widely researched, interviews helped to collect valuable, first-hand insights. Additionally, because SMEs can vary greatly by industry, size, or the backgrounds of the owners (i.e. family run business, privately held or start-ups); interviews gave us the flexibility to explore different issues as they naturally came up in each conversation.

The inductive approach taken in this study, suited the primary focus to understanding how SME employers perceive inclusion of neurodivergent employees within their organisation. Unlike surveys, which often rely on numbers and fixed responses, qualitative research helps capture detailed insights into people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Considering that this research topic is a relatively emerging field of study, a qualitative exploratory approach which is commonly adopted in previous research, suited for data collection and analysis (Albright, et al., 2020) (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019).

7.2. Methodological Rationale

Each interview was carefully analysed using an inductive thematic Analysis (TA). This method is well suited for bottom-up approach (i.e. coding without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or to researcher's analytic preconceptions and is more data driven). This approach involves systematically identifying the codes, organising, and interpreting meaningful patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach also allows the specific research question to evolve through the coding process.

One of the key strengths of thematic analysis is its flexibility. It is not tied to any specific theory or way of thinking, which makes it suitable for a wide range of research topics and questions (Braun, et al., 2022). This flexibility gave the researcher the freedom to explore emerging ideas in the data, especially since the topic 'inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in Irish SMEs' which is relatively new and under researched. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, it was important that each theme was clearly defined, supported by multiple relevant quotes from different participants, and that there was no overlap between the themes. This helped maintain clarity and ensured that each theme represented a distinct and meaningful aspect of the participants' experiences. The main goal of using a qualitative approach in this research was to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of the challenges employers face when trying to attract and retain neurodivergent talent. The researcher chose this approach because it allowed participants to provide detailed, thoughtful responses, something that would have been difficult to achieve using other quantitative methods, such as surveys with fixed response options.

7.3. Participants

Researchers suggest that interviewing between 0 to 12 participants is generally suitable for qualitative research. For example, (Albright, et al., 2020) conducted interviews with 13 participants, while (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) interviewed 11. In contrast, (Van Berkel, 2025) recommends a larger sample of around 20 participants when using an inductive approach in qualitative exploratory studies. However, it is also suggested that given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited existing research on this topic, a small sample size is appropriate (Fugard & Potts, 2015) (Cobern & Adams, 2020). Accordingly, for the purpose of the study, a total of six participants were interviewed. The participants were mainly HR managers from various SMEs in Ireland with experience of supporting people practices and business objectives, drive change management, and involved in hiring process. Amongst the six participants, one participant represented from medium to large company, and other five had direct experience working with SMEs. Overall, most of the participants represented either small or medium sized organisation in Ireland. Moreover, the participants mainly belong to Consumer Goods Sector, Academic and Training Services and Arts & Culture industry.

Inclusion criteria for participating consisted of HR managers holding either of the roles such as: DE&I lead, Learning and development lead, HR Partner, those were having experience in managing employees within SMEs in Ireland. The participants would have been involved in some stage of the hiring process, employee relations and driving DE&I strategies but some of them would not be exclusively responsible for decisions with regards to hiring staff. Some participants were solely responsible for managing hiring process within their business, while others were involved in taking hiring decisions, drive learning and development practices, and manage employee life cycle at work. As long as the individual confirmed that they played a role in employee management within SMEs as HR managers, they were eligible to take part in the study.

Four participants were recruited through convenience sampling and mentioned that they have experience managing neurodivergent employees, however, having experience or prior knowledge of hiring neurodivergent individuals was not a requirement for

inclusion in the research. Additional recruitment was carried out through direct outreach to companies operating with Ireland and identified as SMEs. An email with purpose of the research and all relevant details was sent out of over 15 SME organisation and inviting participation in the interviews and two responses received through this initial outreach those were interested to participate in interviews. Table 1.0 outlines the key characteristics of the six participants who were ultimately involved in the research.

Table 1.0 *Participant Demographics and Company Profile Summary*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Role	Industry	Neurodivergent Employees?	Experience in managing neurodivergent staff
P1	HR Manager	Consumer Goods Sector	Yes	Yes
P2	HR Manager - DE&I	Academic and Training Services	Yes	No
P3	HR Manager - DE&I	Arts & Culture	Yes	Yes
P4	HR Manager	Consumer Goods Sector	Yes	Yes
P5	HR Manager	Online Consumer Service	Yes	No
P6	HR Learning & Development Manager	Academic and Training Services	Yes	Yes

Note: All participants are based in the Republic of Ireland. “Experience in managing neurodivergent staff” indicates if the participant has a direct experience in managing a neurodivergent employee in their organisation, as this often-influenced responses. All names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed to ensure anonymity. This table is compiled from interview data; due to anonymity, exact industries are generalised.

7.4. Research instrument

The study included interviews with six selected participants. It aimed to gather insights from individuals working in Human Resources to explore employer perspectives on neurodivergent individuals, including those with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia. All participants were employed in SMEs in Ireland, each with fewer than 250 employees. Interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio and video recorded via Microsoft Teams (Albright, et al., 2020), and additional observational notes were taken during each session to support data analysis. The research instrument consisted of eight questions (see Appendix A). The interview started with first question to understand their general understanding and perspective which relates to R.Q 1. The next question related to R.Q 1.2. the next two relates to R.Q 1.1 followed with next relating to R.Q 1.4. The last 3 questions relate to R.Q 1.3.

The interview schedule was followed to maintain consistency across sessions; however, participants were also encouraged to explore topics they felt connected to or found especially relevant. To stay on track and make sure all research questions were covered, the researcher followed a prepared interview guide and used a set of prompts (see Appendix A) throughout the semi-structured interviews. The researcher also looked at previous studies (Albright, et al., 2020) on managing neurodiversity at workplace (Antony, et al., 2024) and used those findings as inspiration to create the interview questions for this study. Other qualitative research also helped guide the process by providing a structure, which the researcher built on to shape the aims and objectives of the study and develop a set of semi-structured interview questions.

All participants were given a participant information sheet (see Appendix B) and a written consent form (see Appendix C) before the interview. The consent form was also created online using Microsoft Forms and participants were able to provide consent online. This made sure that they fully understood the purpose of the study and how it would be carried out, and that they agreed to take part in the research. After the interview, a digital debrief sheet (see Appendix D) was sent to each participant. This included information about their right to withdraw from the study at any time, as well

as links to support services in case they needed further help. The study was not expected to cause any mental or physical harm to the participants.

7.5. Sampling

For data sampling, the study employed convenience sampling (Gentles, et al., 2015), involving five participants. This non-probability sampling method was chosen for its practicality, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency. It is considered one of the most suitable approaches when data is needed quickly and when ease of access to participants is a key consideration. Hence, the researcher first reached out to colleagues and then to people recommended by them, as long as they met the study's criteria. The sampling then turned to snowballing in order to gather more participants. This means the researcher first reached out to colleagues and then to people recommended by them, as long as they met the study's criteria. Each person received a participant information sheet and a consent form by email. Once the signed consent form was returned, the researcher contacted them to arrange a suitable date and time for the interview.

7.6. Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out with the first participant who met the same criteria as those in the main research study. The participant was a known colleague of the researcher and worked as a Human Resources manager with SME in Ireland. The interview took place using the researcher's NCI student account on Microsoft Teams. During the pilot interview, the planned interview questions were used to check how well they worked in practice. After the pilot, some changes were made to the interview schedule, such as duration of the interview was increased from 30 minutes to 45 minutes to offer the participants a suitable time to express their views. The information collected in the pilot study was also included in the final data used for the main research.

7.7. Researcher's position and Reflexivity

The researcher is a Human Resources (HR) manager, and this professional identity inevitably shapes the research. This positionality of researcher was advantageous since it provided a practical understanding of workplace policies, HR functions, and

organisational dynamics, which aided in building rapport with participants and interpreting data within a relevant context, however, the researcher acknowledge that this professional background carries inherent assumptions. To mitigate this, several reflexive strategies were employed such as; (i) the researcher made an effort to reflect on and be aware of any personal biases or opinions, ensuring a balance between their own perspective and a neutral view. (ii) this background was carefully considered through self-reflection during the study, especially during data collection and analysis. (iii) the researcher made notes while analysing the data to stay aware of how their role and interactions might influence the process.

Although some bias like confirmation bias may have occurred, the data revealed several unexpected subthemes, suggesting that the analysis remained open and balanced. In fact, the researcher's own experiences may have added value by helping them notice subtle details in the interviews that others might have missed. By consciously engaging in this reflexive practice, the aim was to enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research findings

7.8. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews are commonly used qualitative approach in management and organisational studies, aimed at gathering insights and perspectives through conversational exchanges and discussions (Bluhm, et al., 2011). To collect the most useful information and insights, the researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews as the main method for the study since it is said that; In a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews provide deeper insights that are often not possible to obtain through surveys or fixed-response questionnaires (Saunders, 2015). Hence, the main method used for data collection was a semi-structured interview, based on a previous study by (Szulc, 2024) (Albright, et al., 2020).

All interviews were carried out as audio - virtual video calls, and each participant agreed to take part in this format. Before the interviews took place, each participant were contacted via e-mail and a background of the study was informed to them followed with interview invite. Once they agree to participate, they were sent a detailed information pack by email. This pack explained the purpose of the study, what the interview would

involve, and what their rights were as participants. Along with this, they were also sent a consent form, which was created using Microsoft Teams Forms. Participants were asked to read the information carefully and give their permission by signing the consent form online. They were offered sufficient time (a week) during each step to think and respond in case they would like to query anything. After this, a mutually agreed date and time was decided, mode of interview (online via Microsoft Teams app). Once the consent was received, the researcher worked with each participant to agree on a suitable date and time for the interview. The interviews were then carried out over a period of four weeks, giving the researcher enough time to speak with each participant individually and collect valuable data for the study. Additionally, relevant notes were also taken at the end of the interview process. At the start of each interview, the researcher greeted the participant and briefly explained the purpose of the study. Participants were told that the interview would be audio recorded for transcription, but their names would be kept private by using pseudonyms. They were also told that turning on their camera was optional. Once the participant confirmed they were comfortable, the researcher started the recording and transcription using Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. At the end, participants were given a chance to ask any questions. The researcher answered their queries, and once the participant was satisfied, the recording and transcription were stopped. The call ended with the researcher thanking the participant for their time. Afterwards, a digital copy of the debrief sheet was emailed to them. Once the interviews were done, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was done to analyse and explore various themes.

7.9. Data analysis

For the purpose of this study and analysis of the data gathered, the interviews with participants were transcribed using the transcription feature available in the Microsoft Teams application. To maintain confidentiality, all transcripts were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms to participants. The data was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial phase involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data by reading and reviewing each transcript various times to fully understand participants' viewpoint. Audio recordings were also revisited to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the transcriptions. This process is aimed to fully deep dive into the data as recommended

by (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this process, the researcher noted key observations and reflections on each transcript to help interpret the participants' genuine perspectives and experiences (Braun, et al., 2022).

The process of data analysis began with the coding phase. Key phrases or words, known as codes, were grouped to relevant segments of the data to capture their core meaning (Braun, et al., 2022). An inductive thematic analysis guided the coding, meaning the analysis was rooted in the participants' responses. Open coding was used, allowing the researcher to develop and refine codes during the analysis rather than relying on a predefined list. Once the coding was completed, the data was organised into categories based on similar codes. This helped summarise central ideas and identify recurring patterns across the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From these categories, broader themes were constructed by identifying connections across multiple transcripts. These preliminary themes were then reviewed against the entire data set to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Any themes lacking sufficient support were removed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four final themes were clearly defined and named (See Appendix E). Each theme was designed to be distinct, yet aligned with the research aim, ensuring no overlap. The final stage involved writing the analysis, where the themes were explored in depth using their relevance, frequency, and direct quotes as supporting evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

7.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations form the cornerstone of qualitative research and play a crucial role throughout the research process (Saunders, 2015). Hence, the study was conducted with the informed consent of all participants. No ethical issues were anticipated to arise from the research or interview process. A clear context of the study was provided to the participants those were interviewed, and each of the individual received a detailed information sheet outlining the study's aims and what participation would involve. The data collected during the research was treated with confidentiality. The anonymity of the participants those were interviewed was protected and no names of the participants or of their companies was mentioned in the findings. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the research, and interview transcripts were anonymised once transcribed. An interview consent form was signed by all the

participants, and they were informed they could stop the interview at any time they might feel uncomfortable (Kvale, 2007). All interviews were audio and video recorded solely for transcription purposes, with participants providing written consent to both participation and recording. The data was securely stored on a password-protected in NCI OneDrive as per NCI data protection guidelines. The study ensured to respect and protect the rights and dignity of all participants. The three key principles stated in the Belmont report (HHS.gov, 1979); 1. Respect for Person 2. Beneficence and 3. Justice was carefully followed throughout the process. The findings are based on thorough analysis of the data, with responses and observations presented in their proper context and not misrepresented. Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed, particularly regarding workplace experiences, strict confidentiality measures were followed.

8. Analysis and Findings

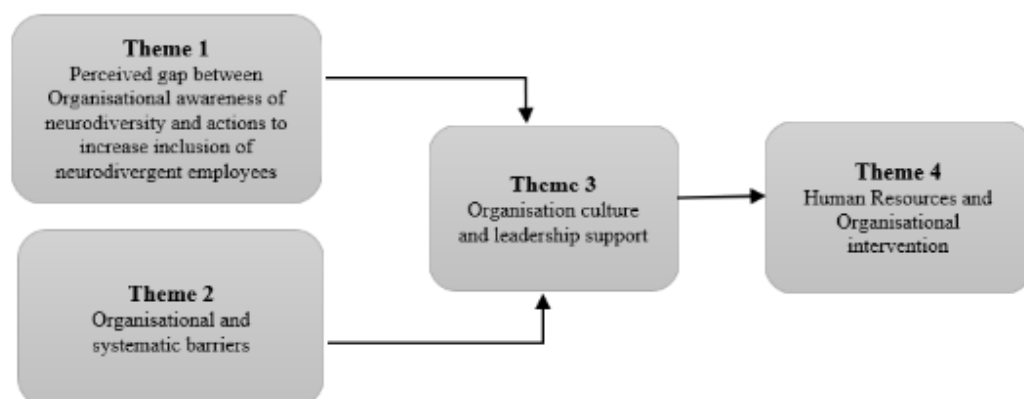
The primary aim of the study was to explore the viewpoint of HR managers within SMEs in Ireland towards employing and managing the neurodivergent individuals. The research questions aim to explore the perspectives of HR managers towards the limitations, barriers and benefits SME face to include neurodivergent to offer a deeper understanding of their beliefs and attitudes on the topic. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the existing literature on inclusion of neurodivergent employees in the workplace, and it is hoped that this larger body of research may influence workplace policy in the future.

Four distinct themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data gathered through interviews with HR managers from SMEs. The analysis of the six interviews reveal a rich, multi-layered perspective on the state of neurodiversity inclusion within Irish workplaces. The experiences range from organisations at the very nascent stages of awareness to those actively implementing structured, strategic initiatives. These findings from a thematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews conducted with HR managers was guided by the principles of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, moving from initial coding of the raw data to the development of coherent, overarching themes. The process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the participants' narratives.

The analysis revealed four primary themes that capture the complex landscape of inclusion of neurodivergent employees in the Irish SME context. These themes are not distinct but are systemically interconnected, as illustrated in the thematic map developed as part of this data analysis. The foundational theme, “Organisation culture and leadership support”, dictates whether an organisation remains trapped by “Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees” and “Organisational and systematic barriers”, or whether it can progress to implementing the practical strategies outlined in “Human Resources and organisational intervention”. This section will explore each theme and its constituent subthemes in detail, using direct quotations from the participants to illuminate their lived experiences and professional perspectives.

8.1. Thematic Map

The four themes are interconnected in a systemic way. Theme 3 (Organisation culture and leadership support acts as the foundation). Without leadership buy-in and psychological safety, organisations remain stuck in Theme 1 (Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees) and Theme 2 (Organisational and systematic barriers (citing resource constraints and inflexible systems)). A positive and intentional culture is the necessary precondition to overcome these hurdles. Only then can an organisation effectively implement the tangible, practical solutions outlined in Theme 4 (Human Resources and organisational intervention). Theme 4 represents the functional output of a successful strategy, which is built upon the foundation of a supportive culture that has moved past fear and inertia.



8.2. Theme 1: Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees

A dominant theme across all interviews was the significant gap between a general, often passive, awareness of neurodiversity and the implementation of concrete, proactive actions. While most participants acknowledged the growing importance of the topic, they described their organisations as being in the early stages of a journey, frequently operating in a reactive mode rather than from a strategic, forward-thinking position.

8.2.1.Subtheme 1.1: Reactive vs. Proactive Stance

A consistent pattern emerged where organisational engagement with neurodiversity was triggered by a specific event, most commonly a performance issue, rather than by a proactive inclusion strategy. This reactive posture highlighted by participants infers that support is often initiated from a point of deficit, after challenges have already arisen. Participant P1 described this dynamic clearly, noting that disclosures often happened because of other conversations and stated, "It was probably challenges that had arisen and through the course of those conversations they identified challenges that they were having ADHD and that's why it is like more right now as a reactive rather than being proactive." This sentiment was echoed by Participant P6, who observed that neurodiversity often only makes it onto the agenda when its need is highlighted and stated "Possibly neurodiversity is on the agenda when it needs to be. People are probably reacting to versus proactively going after, in my experience". This reactive approach creates a cycle where the organisation is always one step behind, managing problems rather than building an environment where they are less likely to occur. Participant P4's experience in a profit-driven SME highlighted how neurodiversity was viewed not as a strategic asset but as an operational problem to be managed and stated that "It is more seen as a challenge where we have to react to this. It's a challenge that the management don't really want to deal with it".

8.2.2.Subtheme 1.2: Perception that neurodivergent employees may feel concern disclosing their status

The gap between “perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employee’s awareness and action” is profoundly influenced by the " Perception that neurodivergent employees may feel concern disclosing their status". While the participants recognised that for support to be provided, employees often need to disclose their neurotype, they also understood the immense fear and vulnerability associated with this act, which prevents many from coming forward.

Participant P2 articulated the core of this issue, highlighting the need for employee confidence and organisational trust "It does require staff to have a level of confidence about disclosing something personal about themselves. We need more work in relation to that to establish trust within the workplace so that staff feel comfortable going to their employer". Participant P5 spoke about the fear from both sides of the table; the employee's fear of discrimination and the employer's fear of legal risks when a neurodivergent individual is not hired after disclosing their neurodiverse condition. Participant P5 stated "The fear is the moment they disclose that it puts them on a disadvantage. I would fight with the idea that do people think that they have not been hired because of their disability?".

Several participants perceived this fear to be a significant barrier to action. Organisations hesitate to ask about the neurodivergent condition or if anyone needs reasonable accommodation, and employees hesitate to tell, creating a stalemate. Participant P3 added that even when support is available, it is contingent on the employee revealing the full extent of their needs, which is a difficult step and said "There is not much you can do as an employer if an individual does not fully disclose a disability to you".

8.2.3.Subtheme 1.3: Lack of formal Strategy

The perceived gap between organisational awareness and action to include neurodivergent into workforce is cemented by a widespread lack of formal, documented DE&I or inclusive strategies expressed by all participants. Participant P1 candidly

described their organisation's position and said "Do we have a strategy? I would say we are at the very early stages of that, and we would say that we are very open and welcoming". Participant P4's experience was even more stark, where a superficial statement on job descriptions was not backed by any internal policy or ethos and said "No, they don't, have an DE&I policy and I don't see that translate into the company ethos". Participant P5 explained that even with the desire to implement a policy, the resource constraints of an SME made it a low priority and said "We don't have a specific policy around. It is not because we don't necessarily want it. Time being a resource haven't necessarily been a resource to be able to implement it because again, we're a small business".

8.3. Theme 2: Organisational and systemic barriers

This theme encapsulates the specific set of challenges and perceived limitations that SMEs face when trying to implement neuro-inclusive practices. Participants consistently raised concerns related to resource scarcity, a pervasive fear of "getting it wrong," and the constraints imposed by inflexible, pre-existing systems and cultural barriers.

8.3.1. Subtheme 2.1: Resource Scarcity

The most frequently cited barrier by all participants was the lack of resources. For SMEs, this was not an abstract concept but a daily operational reality that directly competed with the perceived demands of inclusion. Participant P1 questioned whether the rapidly changing organisation dynamics and its business operations had the bandwidth to provide the necessary support and further said "Do we have the time to give to adapting that somebody may need as we would need to spend time educating our managers, resourcing our managers and that takes time and resources". Participant P3 acknowledged the perception of high costs, even while arguing that many accommodations are low-cost and said "Some might be wondering about the costs, so there is a cost attached. However, it's not as much as most people would think". Participant P4 linked the lack of resources directly to the profit-driven mindset of their former employer and said "Smaller companies, while resources are usually limited, that's probably a big reason why there's no focus on it. They don't see return on

investment". Participant P5 described the pressure on staff in a small business, where there is little capacity for additional workload and said, "In smaller companies, you are nearly squeezing what you can out of the people that you have and there is not much that they can give".

8.3.2.Subtheme 2.2: Fear and lack of knowledge

Beyond tangible resources, a significant psychological barrier was the fear of making mistakes, coupled with a profound lack of knowledge about neurodiversity. This fear often leads to inaction, as managers and organisations prefer to avoid the topic altogether rather than risk mishandling it. Participant P3 identified this fear as a primary obstacle for SMEs and said, "I suppose there is always that element of fear involved and risk they view it as a risk People are very conscious of not wanting to make a mistake or do the wrong things, and because of that they sort of avoid it altogether". Participant P2 noted that this fear can be paralysing and said, "I do think sometimes people are paralysed into inaction because they're afraid of making mistakes". Participant P6 also highlighted that the core barrier is a lack of knowledge, which creates nervousness among managers and said "The biggest barrier is knowledge I think and understanding. I think that if managers are nervous or don't know how to deal with employees, it's a barrier for sure".

8.3.3.Subtheme 2.3: Inflexible Systems and "One-Size-Fits-All" mentality

The final barrier within this theme relates to rigid organisational structures and policies. In smaller companies, there is often a "one-size-fits-all" approach that struggles to accommodate individual differences. Participant P4 provided a powerful example of a blanket rule on punctuality that directly conflicted with the needs of an employee with ADHD and stated that "They had a blanket rule. Everybody has to show up to work on time. it can't put blanket rule in for everybody because not everybody you know, especially for someone who's neurodivergent might struggle with coming to work on time". Participant P5 pointed out the challenge of a flat structure where there is nowhere to "hide," making any perceived performance dip immediately visible and potentially impactful on the team and said that "Another barrier would be for small businesses like us is that there isn't much place to hide. it's very visible when somebody isn't kind of

pulling their weight and then that has the ability to impact the actual rest of the team". Overall, all participants cited that this inflexibility, whether in policy or in structure, creates an environment that is inherently challenging for neurodivergent individuals who may require different ways of working to thrive.

8.4. Theme 3: Organisation culture and leadership support

Emerging as the foundational and most critical theme, organisation culture and leadership support underscores that successful inclusion is not merely a set of HR processes but a deep-seated cultural commitment. This theme revolves around the crucial influence of leadership in championing change and the absolute necessity of creating an environment of psychological safety where all employees feel valued and secure.

8.4.1. Subtheme 3.1: The critical role of leadership

Across every interview, participants identified leadership at all levels as the single most important factor in driving inclusion. Leadership buy-in was seen as the non-negotiable starting point for any meaningful change. Participant P3 was unequivocal about this and said "It's not going to happen if there is no buy in from the top. Leadership is vital. Somebody has to stand up and make the point and pursue it and push for it to happen". Participant P1 echoed this, emphasising the cascading effect of leadership messaging and stated "I think it needs to start at the top. The messaging as you say it needs to start with senior leadership and then the manager's needs to be living it". Participant P4 identified the lack of a senior champion as the primary reason for inaction in the organisation and said, "You need someone within this company who's really championing that and talking about it and making or helping the senior management understand the value in it because at the moment they don't see the value and no one's talking about it". Participant P2 also highlighted the positive impact when this leadership is present and said "I do think at senior management level, we have a strong message that is what we want, which I think it is really important. So, if you have that message from the top, I think it maybe can help people feel more comfortable".

8.4.2.Subtheme 3.2: Fostering Psychological Safety

Directly linked to leadership is the creation of a psychologically safe environment. Participants described this as a culture of trust, openness, and empathy, where employees feel secure enough to be their authentic selves and disclose their needs without fear of judgment or reprisal. Participant P2 framed the ultimate goal as creating this safe space and said, "That's why I say one of the most important things for me is that are we creating a space where people feel comfortable to disclose what their needs may be". Participant P6 spoke about the importance of an open and transparent relationship between manager and employee and said, "I think it's that openness and transparency between manager and employee and hopefully they have a comfortable relationship with their manager that they're able to share with them". Participant P3 connected this safety directly to a sense of belonging and said, "I think it's about creating that kind of atmosphere where there is safety, there is trust, and then that person can feel like they belong there".

8.4.3.Subtheme 3.3: Shifting from Deficit to Strengths-Based View

A key component of an inclusive culture is a fundamental shift in mindset from viewing neurodiversity as a deficit or problem to be managed, to seeing it as a source of unique strengths and valuable perspectives. Participant P3 articulated this benefit clearly and said "It changes the culture. It changes the perspective; it adds some richness. The typical linear approach to solving problems changes because of the dynamic way of thinking that people who are neurodivergent can attack issues". Participant P4, despite the challenges, recognised the creative strengths of the neurodivergent colleague and said " The ADHD worker was very creative and was brilliant at working of software and other creative tools. I think that was probably a strength because of the neurodivergent traits". Participant P1 believed the inclusion of different thinkers as a driver for organisational growth and learning and said "I think it would challenge us to look to how we communicate with people, how we performance manage people. I think difference is what drives us forward".

8.5. Theme 4: Human Resources and organisation intervention

This final theme moves from the abstract cultural foundations to the tangible, practical actions and tools that organisations can implement. Participants identified a clear set of strategies focused on education, adapting core HR processes, and implementing low-cost, universally beneficial accommodations.

8.5.1. Subtheme 4.1: The value of education and awareness

The most universally cited recommendation by all participants was the need for education and training. This was seen as the essential first step to demystify neurodiversity, build empathy, and equip managers with the confidence and skills to support their teams effectively. Participant P1 concluded the interview by emphasising the point "I think it is education actually and then probably clarity on what the company's stance on it is". Participant P6 identified the need of education as the key to overcoming barriers and said, "The biggest barrier is knowledge and understanding, I think education and building awareness with managers and employees is really, the key to enabling an inclusive workplace". Participant P3 stressed the importance of training for front line and said, "There is a need generally for particularly managers to undergo neurodiversity awareness training, and indeed like generally disability awareness training".

8.5.2. Subtheme 4.2: Adapting the HR Lifecycle

Participants provided specific, practical suggestions for adapting key HR processes from recruitment to onboarding and daily work life to be more inclusive. Participant P2 outlined several potential changes to the recruitment process and said, "Being very clear about what the hiring process is, how many people might be on the panel or even all interview candidates would have the questions beforehand prior to the interview could be some steps". Participant P2 further added about relooking at the onboarding solution and suggested about assigning a 'Buddy Program' and said, "It might be something worth considering is around a buddy system or a mentoring system for somebody who is onboarding". Participant P1 also reflected on their experience with a neurodivergent employee, listed several key supports needed throughout their work life and said, "What they needed was more frequent conversations, they needed absolute clarity on what was

expected., need reassurance and that change was a big thing which needed to be broken down".

8.5.3.Subtheme 4.3: Low-Cost, High-Impact accommodations

Finally, there was a strong emphasis on the fact that many of the most effective accommodations are not expensive or complex. Instead, they are often simple, low-cost adjustments. Participant P3 made this point explicitly to counter the fear of high costs and said, "The changes that are required are often most of the time they don't involve any cost, so you could talk about something like dimming the lights in the room or, you know, providing noise cancellation headphones or providing quiet spaces".

Participant P4 also highlighted the value of flexibility, which costs nothing but can make a huge difference and adds that "Having a bit of reasonable accommodation in terms of flexibility of your work hours if you need to start earlier, finish later, any of that kind of thing makes a huge difference". These practical, often simple, changes represent the tangible output of a neuro-inclusive strategy, but as the thematic map suggests, they can only be implemented effectively when built upon the foundation of a supportive leadership and inclusive organisation culture.

9. Discussion

9.1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of SME employers in Ireland towards inclusion of neurodivergent employees in the workplace, and gather their views around the related limitations, barriers, strength and support needed to include greater inclusivity of neurodivergent workers within the workplace. To the author's knowledge, this is one of the first empirical qualitative study conducted to understand perspectives of HR managers within SMEs in Ireland with respect to factors impacting the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within the SME organisations. Using qualitative research methods, semi-structured interviews with six managers, and thematic analysis of interview transcripts, four key themes and subthemes were identified: Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees, Organisational and

systematic barriers, Organisation culture and leadership support and Human Resources and organisational intervention.

9.2. Summary of findings

The thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with HR managers revealed four key interconnected themes that outlines their understanding and expectations towards inclusion of neurodiversity within the SMEs. The findings show that while there is a growing awareness, substantial barriers still hinder progress towards implementing practical actions.

The first theme ‘Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees’ reveals lack of formal organisational strategy focused on fostering neurodiversity. This theme also reflects ‘disclosure of neurodivergent condition’ as one of the key barriers that limits them to plan proactively offering support or accommodation to neurodivergent employees. The second theme ‘Organisational and systematic barriers’ reveals various operational barriers such as resource scarcity, cost impact, budgetary issues, fear of risk and inflexible systems those are more specific to SMEs. The third theme ‘Organisation culture and leadership support’ has emerged as the most critical theme, with participants agreeing that a positive culture driven by leadership is not only the success factor but also the basic need for any successful inclusion initiative. This theme reveals the importance of leadership buy-in, importance of fostering psychological safety and recognising the unique strength which neurodivergent employees can offer. The fourth theme ‘Human Resources and organisational intervention’ is more future focused where participants revealed the need of support, Training, accessibility of information and shared their views around some of the tangible, accessible actions that SMEs can implement

9.3. Critical analysis of findings

This section will critically analyse the findings in relation to inclusion of neurodivergent employees within the workplace. In the previous studies presented in section 5, need for knowledge and awareness within organisations along with

importance of inclusive leadership and recognising strengths of neurodivergent individuals was evident, therefore, the researchers objective to examine the perspective of SME employers in Ireland through the lens of HR managers offers a rich insight and adds to future studies.

All the six participants unanimously agreed the need of a formal neurodiversity strategy. This is the core finding of theme ‘Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees’ where most of the participants (P1, P4, P5, P6) acknowledged that the DE&I practices are driven in their organisation, it lacks a formal strategy that could also embed neurodiversity within the DE&I strategy. On this context, participants P2 and P3 openly spoke about certain neurodiversity specific initiatives those have gained focus recently. Participants were also open about the reactive approach caused by non-disclosure of neurodivergent conditions by neurodivergent individuals. They further added that the disclosure of neurodivergent condition happens when they encounter certain issues (performance or interpersonal) with those individuals. This finding resonates with the finding of (Albright, et al., 2020) who revealed employers concern related to ASD symptoms and social communication deficits through a qualitative thematic method and in-depth interview of a sample of 13 employers in the U.S. Albright (2020) shows that most of the participants emphasised the importance of ‘disclosure’ to be able to offer support proactively if they know the unique strengths and weaknesses of neurodivergent individuals during the hiring and recruitment process. Similarly, in the current study, the participants expressed that neurodiversity is mostly managed in an ad-hoc manner within their organisation and appeared unsure if whether can they proactively request for disclosure prior to employing a neurodivergent individual. This was revealed when participants stated that they need to be aware more about neurodivergent conditions, but they don’t know where to start from. The similar finding was also seen in the previous literature (Venter & Rossouw, 2025).

The theme of “Organisational and systematic barriers” seen from the perspective of HR managers within SME organisations revealed some significant barriers to neurodivergent inclusion mainly applicable to SMEs. Participants expressed that the most common barrier was a lack of time, money, and a leaner structure of SMEs.

Participants feedback highlights the concerns about limited time, resources, and staff capacity for neurodiversity training, with some linking the issue to a profit-focused mindset that undervalues its return on investment. This finding resonates with the finding of (Van Berkel, 2025) where the study reveals size, capabilities and opportunities are some of the key predictors for SME employers to include people with disability and often neurodiversity is misunderstood with disability (Khan, et al., 2023). Participants in the current study expressed a mix of intense emotions filled with, disappointment, helplessness and fear of risk which continued to occur as were self-reflecting while expressing their views. This finding resonates with the findings of previous qualitative descriptive research study by Venter and Rossouw (2025), where nature of organisational support provided to employees with dyslexia was explored through 15 semi-structured interviews of employees with dyslexia (Venter & Rossouw, 2025). The thematic analysis in this study revealed the necessary support from the employers regarding accommodations such as laptops with specific software and spell checker or text-to-speech and speech-to-text programmes are often not offered. The similar findings is seen in the current study where participant P4 indicated profit-driven mindset and participant P1 and P5 expressed concerns with limited time and resources.

The theme “organisational culture and leadership support” was seen as the foundational theme. This emerged as the most critical theme, with participants agreeing that a positive culture driven by leadership is the most important driver of inclusion to neurodiversity. All participants in the current study indicated that leadership plays a vital role in driving neurodiversity inclusion and expressed that without leadership buy-in and senior leaders advocating the importance of neurodiversity, it is difficult to shift the mindset from ‘profit focused’ to ‘people-focused’. Participant P3 emphasised on leadership buy-in while P1 and P4 indicated that the change needs to start with senior leadership and till line managers. This finding resonates with the previous study (Szulc, 2024) where participants emphasised the importance of empathy and understanding among leaders as the motivator. Szulc (2024) conducted this qualitative study with a semi-structured interview of 12 neurodivergent and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings in the study (Szulc, 2024) indicated ‘empathy’ as the key characteristics of inclusive leadership. It further reveals that when leaders understand the need of neurodivergent employees, they can better support them, utilise their unique strengths leading to improved work efficiency and psychological Safety

whereas a ‘dismissive attitude’ among leaders can make a neurodivergent employee feel disregarded as indicated by participant 1 and participant 6 in (Szulc, 2024). This finding mirrors the finding of the current study where participant P2 and P3 emphasised creating a ‘safe space’ for neurodivergent employees that could make them feel comfortable to disclose their neurodivergent condition and foster a sense of “belonging”. Participants P3 and P1 also added that neurodiversity enriches the culture of the organisation and offers a unique perspective of problem-solving approaches. This finding further resonates with finds of (Albright, et al., 2020), (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) and (Kamble, et al., 2024). In the study by Kamble and colleagues (2024), “Stigma and stereotypes surrounding neurodivergent conditions” was identified by 56.4% of respondents as a significant barrier.

In relation to the theme “Human Resources and organisational interventions” all the six participants expressed the need and benefits of knowledge and training as the fundamental need to foster inclusion of neurodivergent employees in SMEs. Participant P6 indicated a lack of "knowledge and understanding" as the biggest barrier to inclusion and participant P3 indicated "education and building awareness” as the key and specifically stressed the need for "neurodiversity awareness training" for managers. This mirrors the findings with the findings of a previous research study aimed to identify the factors influencing the acceptance of neurodiversity among Indian employees, using quantitative method and hypothesis testing (Kamble, et al., 2024). The findings by Kamble and colleagues (2024) strongly reveals the need for increased education initiatives to foster a greater awareness and knowledge of neurodivergent conditions among employers and employee. Participants feedback in the study (Kamble, et al., 2024) was gathered through survey and it was revealed that 69.9% participants cited “Lack of awareness and understanding about neurodiversity” as the most prominent barrier. In this current study, participants suggested practical changes to core HR processes. P2 recommended making the hiring process more neurodivergent friendly by providing interview questions beforehand and suggested the need of "buddy system" while onboarding can offer a greater support to neurodivergent employees and this finding resonated with the findings of (Venter & Rossouw, 2025) where several respondents with dyslexia highlighted the need of “appointing a colleague as a proofreader” or a “language facilitator”. In the current study, participant P1 highlighted the need for removing communication barriers and clearly conveying the expectations

to neurodivergent employees could address some of the barriers SMEs face. This resonates with the findings of (Whelpley & Woznyj, 2023). The qualitative study by Whelpley & Woznyj (2023) using grounded theory, examined the successful management of autistic workers in the workplace and how managers can build effective communication with their autistic workers. (Whelpley & Woznyj, 2023) revealed the need to balance the balance a teeter totter with equal treatment by offering role clarity, employee voice and various effective ways of communicating with autistic workers. In this current study, a strong emphasis was made by participant P3 that some of the effective accommodations which organisations could offer are simple and inexpensive. Participants P3, P5 and P1 explicitly countered the impact of high costs, however P3 revealed that some changes like "providing noise cancellation headphones or providing quiet spaces" are often low cost or no cost. Participant P4 added that offering "flexible working' can make a huge difference but these interventions required organisations support and commitment towards fostering inclusion. Overall, all the participants indicated some clear solutions of tangible, accessible actions that SMEs can implement.

9.4. Contributions of the current findings and future research

The findings of this qualitative study offer a foundational understanding of how SMEs perceive inclusion of neurodivergent employees in Ireland. It also reveals several critical avenues for deeper further research. The key barriers, limitations and strengths revealed from an HR perspective, serves as a crucial contribution for more evidence-based studies. The themes "Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees", "Organisational and Systemic Barriers", "Organisation culture and leadership support" and "Human Resources and organisational intervention" highlights specific challenges focused to SMEs are often overlooked in broader research on this topic. This gap in the existing literature (Kamble, et al., 2024) (Kersten, et al., 2025) (Davies, et al., 2025) (Whelpley & Woznyj, 2023) (Szulc, 2024) is addressed in the current study.

The theme "Organisation culture and leadership support" and "Human Resources and organisation intervention" is a broad and significant theme. The main findings were that how an organisations culture impacts its policies, inclusion practices and it can address some of systematic barriers those may be achievable with low-cost

accommodations. Additionally, the findings reveal some significant challenges faced by the HR professionals despite recognising the need for a structured DE&I strategy including neurodiversity. Many previous studies have explored employer's perspective through the lens of HR professionals mainly involved in either to hiring of neurodivergent employees or in HR operational roles (Albright, et al., 2020) (Kersten, et al., 2025) (Potter & Ramji, 2025), however, this current study offers valuable insights through the lens of HR managers having a holistic experience of hiring, managing, training and acting as DE&I advocates. Finally, the findings revealed that while employers recognise the unique benefit of neurodivergent employees which could be enhanced with support and accommodations, it is possible when there is proactive disclosure of neurodivergent condition.

9.5. Strengths and limitations

The aim of qualitative research is not to generalisable findings but to gain an in-depth perspective of HR managers towards inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within SMEs in Ireland. While this can be seen as a weakness in the methodology but considering the intentions of the study the researcher successfully met its intended purpose.

Convenience sampling used for this study can be potentially prone to selection bias, but the researcher's judgement was based on clear inclusion criteria outlined in all research materials. The small number of participants could also be seen as a limitation, however due time restrictions the researcher had to cease recruitment of participants. Another limitation worth considering is that of various industry type; the participants interviewed belong to different industry groups such as (Consumer and goods, academic, Arts & Culture and customer service) that may have an effect on their perspective towards this topic. Hence, some of the findings expressed by participants may vary with different nature of industry that may be an area that requires future research.

There were concerns that the sensitive nature of the topic, combined with the fact that the research was a dissertation study offering no direct benefit to participants, might present challenges in securing voluntary participation. However, the researcher

received interest from more potential participants than could ultimately be included in the study. The sensitive nature of the topic may present situations where participants may not be forthcoming with information relating to their specific experience managing neurodivergent individual, however, this was not so and the data appeared to be relevant and participants disclosed their personal experience managing neurodivergent employees and their challenges that were similar to previous studies relating to 'Inclusion of neurodivergent individuals at workplace' research. The clear research questions aimed specifically to specific cohort within SMEs in Ireland, the consistent nature of the questions in the interview all contribute to the strength of this study. This research was focused specifically on the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within SME employers in Ireland, and despite the challenges in recruitment of participants, the researcher remained committed to this objective, which represents a significant strength of the study.

9.6. Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the perspective of HR managers towards inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within SMEs in Ireland. This study has contributed to the research on the topic 'Inclusion to neurodivergent individuals within workplace' focusing mainly on SMEs within Irish context and explore the key barriers and strengths within SMEs. The research findings show that despite having an intent to include neurodivergent individuals and employ them within the organisation; the lack of awareness, limited resources, profit-drive mindset and inaccessibility to information pertaining to neurodiversity, limits the SMEs to foster a more inclusive organisation. The key conclusion of this research is that for Irish SMEs, the journey towards inclusion of neurodivergent individuals requires a host of consideration. Besides the financial commitment, it needs education and training, inclusive HR practices and most importantly leadership buy in to drive an inclusive organisation culture. This research shows that while the knowledge and awareness is the first step towards neurodiversity is embedding 'Neurodiversity' into organisations DE&I strategy and securing leadership-buy-in that may help SMEs to take informed decisions and move towards fostering an inclusive organisation culture. This study will also help various advocacy groups and national bodies to tailor their offerings more from the perspective of SMEs. Alongside, it will also help individuals with neurodiverse conditions to recognise the

importance of ‘disclosure’ and SME’s positive attitude towards offering accommodations to support them advance in their career. The themes identified were generally consistent across all HR managers interviewed, except for differences in “adaptation” and “approaches to inclusion,” which influenced workplace culture and team dynamics. Given the richness of the data, the researcher intends to build on this study in greater depth in future.

9.7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and previously existing studies (Albright, et al., 2020) (Ali, et al., 2024) (Silver, et al., 2023) (Szulc, 2024) (Venter & Rossouw, 2025), the following recommendations are made that has the potential to contribute towards greater inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within the SMEs in Ireland.

9.7.1. Understanding, Awareness and Knowledge

This finding from suggests that there is a greater need of awareness and understanding of neurodiversity concepts among the SME organisations that could significantly enhance acceptance levels in the workplace. Theme ‘Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees’ highlights the need for awareness. Therefore, it is recommended that SMEs implement mandatory neurodiversity awareness training for all employees like the recommendation by Kamble and colleagues (20245). While (Kamble, et al., 2024) adopted a quantitative research method, the recommended offered by the study for ‘Sensitivity Training’ resonates with recommendation of the current study.

9.7.2. Accommodations, Workplace adjustments and Support

The findings from the theme ‘organisational and systemic barriers’ highlights the need for workplace adjustments, accommodation and support similar to the prior study (Waisman-Nitzan, et al., 2019) where the findings revealed additional support offered to individuals with ASD (such as support services to facilitate the integration of ASD employee at workplace) can greatly influences employer’s attitude towards employees with ASD. (Albright, et al., 2020) also advocated how vocational rehabilitation

programs could help to prepare individuals with autism to identify their unique strengths. Similarly, (Kamble, et al., 2024) and (Venter & Rossouw, 2025) also advocated for the need of assistive workplace adjustment such as text-to-speech software for individuals with dyslexia, noise-cancelling headphones for sensory sensitivities, and task management apps for organization and time management. (AS I AM, 2025) (Department of Social Protection, 2025) offers a valuable insight with latest trend, trainings programs and support that can support SMEs towards creating a stronger inclusion strategy.

9.7.3. Inclusive HR Policies and Practices

The findings of this current study reveal the need to relook at the organisation & HR policies to support greater inclusivity of neurodivergent individuals. (Albright, et al., 2020) revealed positive attitude of employers indicating that inclusive hiring practices can promote diversity in the workplace. Participants highlighted the need of workplace adjustments, flexible working, and ongoing conversations to happen with neurodivergent employees. Similar recommendation was highlight in a qualitative study by Davies and colleagues (2025) where semi-structured with 18 autistic adults was conducted to explore their experiences of, and perspectives on, career success. (Davies, et al., 2025) recommended the need for regular check-ins with autistic employees could involve open-ended conversations about changing workplace needs to ensure adjustments can be adapted to match employees' evolving requirements over time. Davies and colleagues (2025) also advocated for additional support to support such as 'grants and funding' to be spent on training programmes and mentorship initiatives. Further, flexibility in the hiring process can enhance greater inclusivity. A similar recommendation was noted in (Kamble, et al., 2024) where changes to interview and assessment mechanism was noted.

9.7.4. Creating an inclusive organisation culture

The findings in study highlighted the importance of inclusive organisation culture and empathetic leadership. Based on the participants feedback, it is recommended to recognise the need for physical and mental wellbeing of all employees, addressing perceived barriers and education and awareness programs for leader. This

recommendation is observed in many previous studies (Albright, et al., 2020) (Venter & Rossouw, 2025) (Kamble, et al., 2024) (Szulc, 2024) (Kersten, et al., 2025). The qualitative study conducted by Szulc (2024) analysed the perspective of 12 neurodivergent employees and 15 neurotypical managers; the study focused on relationship between leader-member exchange theory, recommended the need of workplace adjustments, clearly articulating supportive policies those are easy to understand for neurodivergent employees and need for leadership training around empathy (Szulc, 2024). In this current study, participants highlighted the need for leadership buy-in to foster inclusivity, hence, it is recommended that leadership training along with inclusive practices could be useful to drive a positive and diverse organisation culture. The study by Albright and colleagues (2020) focused on SMEs in the U.S also suggest that diversity training efforts play a vital role in fostering inclusion and acceptance of employees with different needs. Moreover, from a cultural perspective, Venter and Rossouw (2025) highlighted the importance of organisation wide awareness initiatives to address the stigma associated with conditions like dyslexia and promote a culture of support (Venter & Rossouw, 2025). Finally, it is recommended to recognise the unique strength of neurodivergent individuals and empowering supervisors via necessary training and organisational support to effectively manage employees with neurodivergent conditions. This recommendation aligns with (Kersten, et al., 2025) in which it is suggested to offer organisational support through training, empowerment, and a collaborative focus on strengths development between employees and managers, helps creating a more supportive and empowering work environment for everyone.

10. Conclusion

The findings of this study make a crucial contribution to a significant gap in the existing literature. To the author's knowledge, existing research and findings on this topic is found to be more applicable to large organisations or multinational enterprises and no empirical study found on SME employers within the Irish context. By focusing specifically on the Irish SME sector that contributes greatly towards the Irish economy, the current study offers rich insights that can be seen relevant for the SMEs. By addressing traditional stereotypes, fostering inclusive work culture and adopting inclusive practices, SMEs can create more supportive and welcoming environments that

fosters inclusion of neurodivergent individuals within workplace. A targeted awareness campaign about neurodiversity inclusion specifically aimed at SMEs can enhance increased neurodiversity inclusion and align with EU driven practices (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2015). A recent report by another SME in Ireland 'CODEX' in association with AsIAM (CODEX & AsIAM, 2025) has highlighted some of success stories, conversation around 'neurodiversity, 'Low-cost accommodations', and a directory of available support services, which could be helpful for the SMEs to access information and thus foster an inclusive culture. This study contributes valuable insights to the literature on neurodiversity in Ireland by exploring HR professional's views on employing neurodivergent individuals and their experience in managing them. It highlights the challenges employers face and aims to promote better support for them, ultimately encouraging more inclusive hiring practices. The findings are intended to help reduce high unemployment rates among neurodivergent people and foster a sense of belonging, benefiting both employers and employees.

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12. Appendix:

12.1. Appendix A

Semi- Structured Interview Schedule

1. What is your perspective about inclusion of neurodivergent employees within the workplace?
2. In your perspective, what kinds of strengths or benefits can an organisation gain by including neurodivergent individuals in its workforce?
3. In your view, what challenges or barriers organisation's might face when trying to include neurodivergent people in the workplace?
4. Does your organisation have DE&I strategy and what is your perspective of including neurodiversity within the DE&I strategy?
5. Do you have any neurodivergent employees in your organisation, if not, what is your perspective of hiring neurodivergent employees within an organisation?
6. In your opinion, what changes or improvements could be made to the hiring and recruitment practices, to make them more inclusive for neurodivergent people?
7. In your view, what is the support required to foster a more inclusive and supportive work life journey for a neurodivergent employee?
8. In your view, how do you think various members of managers in an organisation such as - HR professionals, Senior Leaders and non-neurodivergent employees can help, support and promote neurodiversity inclusion in an organisation like yours?

12.2. Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet

The term neurodiversity encompasses the full spectrum of human neurological differences, including conditions like Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, and others. Neurodiversity refers to viewing these differences as diversity rather than disability, emphasizing the value and strength that diverse minds bring to society. This research study is focused on exploring the strengths and barriers to include neurodivergent employees within the small-to-medium sized organisations in Ireland.

Participant Information Sheet

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

I am Vidhya Jha, Reacher of this study and a student of “master’s in human resource management” course at National College of Ireland, Dublin. I have undertaken this research study under the supervision of Dr. David Mothersill, Associate Professor in Psychology at National College of Ireland. The research is being undertaken as part of the dissertation module of Masters level course in Human Resource Management (QQI Level 9).

The purpose of this study is to explore various factors that may potentially influence inclusion of neurodivergent employees within an Organisation, the study is focused towards small to medium sized Organisation in Ireland and explore employer’s perspective.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

If you do choose to take part, you will be invited to an interview with the researcher. The interview will be conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams and it will be audio-recorded for the purpose of this dissertation project. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and it will be carried out in semi-structured fashion. The interview will revolve around discussing factors that influences inclusion of neurodivergent employees in the Organisation, the barriers, challenges and the benefits. The information gathered through the interview will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student (myself) and their supervisor will have access to. I will use this data to perform qualitative thematic analyses for the purpose of my Masters dissertation research study.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

I am currently in my final semester of the Master's program at National College of Ireland. As a part of my degree, I am required to carry out my own research study, hence, I have chosen to explore the barriers, limitations and potential benefits of neurodiversity at workplace within Ireland; specifically focused towards small to medium sized enterprise. For the purpose of this research study, I believe the perspective of Human resource professionals is extremely valuable as they play an integral role in driving diversity and inclusion within the workplace. Hence, I need to recruit HR Managers / HR professional who are actively involved in recruitment of workers, workforce management, Training and managing employee life cycle at workplace.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

The participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever by notifying the researcher. However, once the data has been analysed and the results have been written up, you will be unable to withdraw your data from the study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits to taking part in this study. However, taking part in this research will allow you to get an idea an overview of what taking part in such research involves. Moreover, this research topic is gaining immense recognition since past few

decades, and so the outcome of this study may offer valuable insights towards in driving this aspect of DE&I at workplace.

The interview questionnaire being used will encourage you to reflect on HR practices, Organisation policies, barriers, limitations and your perspective as people professional towards neurodiversity inclusion. You may find the interview questions difficult to answer. If you feel distressed at all while participating in the interview, contact details for relevant support services will be provided.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes, the interview data will be kept confidential and used in the research as anonymous. All data will be treated in the strictest confidence. Consent forms will be kept in a secure box, which will only be accessible by my supervisor and myself. Your name or Organisation specific information will not be referred to in any way throughout this research study. During the course of this study, if I (the researcher) foresee / believe that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed, I may have to break the confidentiality and report it to the concerned authority (National College of Ireland).

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

Interview recordings and Consent Forms completed and submitted over Microsoft Forms will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student and their supervisor will have access to. Interview recordings will be deleted immediately once they have been transcribed, and all potentially identifying information will be deleted from interview transcripts. Anonymised data will be stored on NCI servers in line with NCI's data retention policy, and that it is envisaged that anonymised data will also be uploaded to a secondary data repository to facilitate validation and replication, in line with Open Science best practice and conventions. In any report on the results of this research the participant's identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing their name and

disguising any details of their interview which may reveal their identity or the identity of people they speak about.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The information gathered through the interview will be analysed and written up as a part of my Masters dissertation research project. If you would like a copy of the final write up, you can contact me at x23100061@student.ncirl.ie, and I would be more than happy to share it with you.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

This research study has been reviewed and received approval from the relevant ethics committee at National College of Ireland. For any further information, you may contact:
Myself @ Vidhya Jha : x23100061@student.ncirl.ie **Or**
My supervisor @ Dr David Mothersill: David.Mothersill@ncirl.ie

THANK YOU

Vidhya Jha

12.3. Appendix C

Written Consent Form

Consent to take part in research

1. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
2. I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
3. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
4. I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
5. I understand that participation involves sharing my views, understanding and experience on the research topic.
6. I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
7. I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
8. I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
9. I understand that interview recordings will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student and their supervisor will have access to.
10. I understand that interview recordings will be deleted immediately once they have been transcribed, and all potentially identifying information will be deleted from interview transcripts.
11. I understand that remaining anonymised interview transcripts will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student and their Research Supervisor will have access to.
12. I understand that anonymised data will be stored on NCI servers in line with NCI's data retention policy, and that it is envisaged that anonymised data will also be uploaded to a secondary data repository to facilitate validation and replication, in line with Open Science best practice and conventions.
13. I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any

details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

14. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in either *dissertation, conference papers, presentations, and/or academic journal articles.*
15. I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
16. I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a password protected drive with researcher until *the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.*
17. I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for *two years from the date of the exam board confirms the result of dissertation.*
18. I understand that under freedom of information legalisation, I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above, up to the point that the data is anonymised. After this point, I will not be able to access the information I have provided as it may not be identifiable
19. I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

12.4. Appendix D

Participant Debrief Sheet

Debriefing Sheet

Dear participant,

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for taking part in this research study.

The aim for this research is to explore the barriers, limitations and opportunities towards inclusion of neurodivergent employees at workplace within Ireland.

Research has shown that while this aspect of Diversity & Inclusion within workplace has attracted a significant recognition in past few years, limited research has been carried out within the context of small to medium sized Organisation in Ireland and thus, it still requires further research to explore the current practices and barriers towards neurodiversity. The perspective of People professionals is extremely valuable for this research, and I hope to convey the perspective through my research. If you are interested in finding out what I discover towards the end of my research journey, you can email me at x23100061@student.ncirl.ie and request a copy of the final write up.

If you feel you have been affected in any way by participating in this research study or if the interview was distressing in any way, I would advise contacting one of the suitable services, using the contact information I have provided below.

Please feel free to take this sheet home. (this is for in person interview)

Samaritans Ireland

Call Freephone: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.ie

Free-text HELLO to 50808 for an anonymous chat with a trained volunteer, any time.

Once again, thank you for taking part in this research study,

Best wishes,

Vidhya Jha

12.5. Appendix E

Initial Code	Subthemes	Main Theme
Reactive support, Performance-driven, disclosure, responding to situations, Not proactive	1.1 Reactive vs. Proactive Stance	1. Perceived gap between organisational awareness of neurodiversity and actions to increase inclusion of neurodivergent employees
Fear of disclosure, Lack of confidence to disclose, Hesitation to share, Creating safe spaces, Trust, Stigma	1.2 Perception that neurodivergent employees may feel concern disclosing their status	
No formal policy, Early stages of strategy, No action plan, not on the agenda, General strategy vs. specific	1.3 Lack of Formal Strategy	
Resource constraints, Lack of time, Cost, Limited HR, Squeezing	2.1 Resource Scarcity (Time, Money, People)	2. Organisational and systematic barriers
ear of getting it wrong, Lack of understanding, Paralysed into inaction, Legal risks, Nervousness	2.2 Fear and Lack of Knowledge	
Blanket rules, Inflexible policies, Visibility of performance, one process fits all, Not accommodating	2.3 Inflexible Systems and "One-Size-Fits-All" Mentality	
Leadership buy-in, starts at the top, Manager's role is critical, Championing the cause,	3.1 The Critical Role of Leadership	3. Organisation culture and leadership support
Psychological safety, Trust, Openness, Empathy, Feeling comfortable	3.2: Fostering Psychological Safety	
Strengths-based approach, Different perspectives, Creativity, Unique traits, Adding richness,	3.3: Shifting from Deficit to Strengths-Based View	
Education, Awareness, Training for managers, Building knowledge, Demystifying neurodiversity.	4.1: The value of education and Awareness	4. Human Resources and organisational intervention
Recruitment changes, Clear job descriptions, Sharing interview questions, Onboarding support, Buddy system, Clear communication	4.2: Adapting the HR Lifecycle	
Low-cost solutions, Simple adjustments, Flexible hours, Quiet spaces, Noise-cancelling headphones, Universal benefits	4.3: Low-Cost, High-Impact Accommodations	